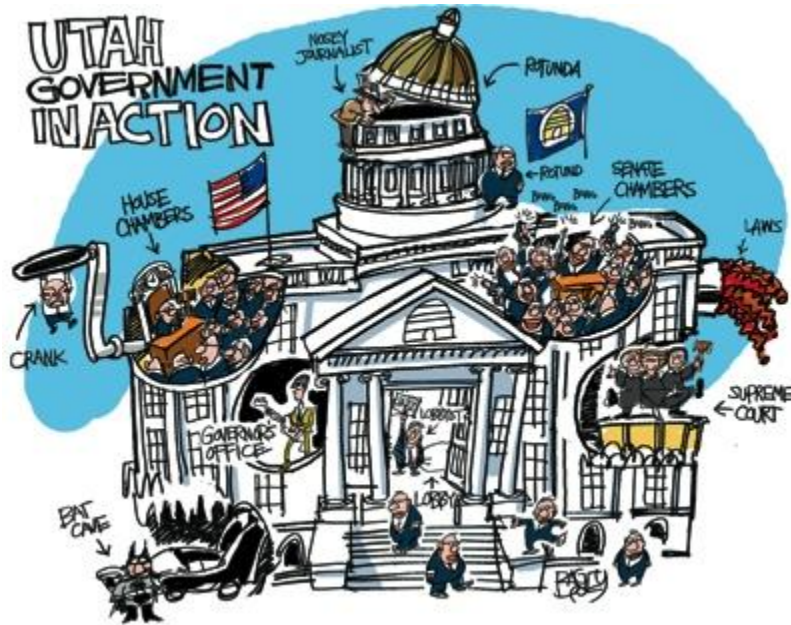


Utah Legislature: The best free show in town

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Utah's annual legislative session boasts many elements of great theater: drama, conflict, humor, dialogue that is sometimes stranger than fiction, and an ever-changing cast of noble, flawed and tragic characters.

It's one of the most reliable sources of free entertainment in our state, and it all takes place in one impressive building-cum-theater, the newly renovated State Capitol. This year the just-opened session runs through March 12.

But lawmaking is not just a spectator sport -- citizens can, even should, participate in this theater of the sometimes absurd. Here's a starter guide to getting a front-row seat, or becoming a supporting actor, in Utah's biggest political production.

Joining the audience

In person » The House and the Senate have their own theaters, known as chambers, with desks and microphones. This is where a lot of the dialogue (and monologue) happens and actual votes on bills are cast. Each has its own gallery for visitors, which open on weekdays around 9:45 a.m. Morning sessions are from 10 to noon, then the players break for lunch and meetings. Seating is pretty much first-come, first-served, said Kathy Jackson, the House administrative assistant. The House gallery seats about 181, most of which is for the public, and the Senate holds 92.

You're also welcome to sit in on the actor workshops, otherwise known as committee meetings, which happen every day before the House and Senate morning sessions, and from 2 to 5 in the afternoon. (Later in the session, the House and Senate will meet in their respective theaters in the afternoon.)

Committee meetings are where ordinary citizens can become stars because they get speaking roles if they sign up in advance; sometimes, ordinary people get to speak extemporaneously. These rooms aren't very big, so it's best to arrive early to get a seat. Otherwise, you'll be listening from the hall.

If you're intent on getting the most dramatic return on your time investment, you have to know the hot-button bills and when they're up for committee discussion or a vote. It's easy to follow the progress of a bill on the Legislature's Web site, www.le.state.ut.us.

Remotely » If you're squeezed out of the House and Senate chambers, overflow rooms have seating and televisions where you can follow the action. Or you can do it from home. You can listen to those discussions, as well as committee meetings, online, although you may need to download a free media player if your computer doesn't have one already.

Playing director

In person »



The full legislature (Senate and House combined) listens in the House to Utah Chief Justice Christine Durham deliver the State of the Judiciary on Jan. 25 on the opening day of the 58th Utah State Legislature General Session. (Scott Sommerdorf / The Salt Lake Tribune)

You can influence an actor's behavior by visiting during the production. Every citizen has a senator and representative, and you can tell them how you want them to behave. They don't have to listen, but you can always try. When lawmakers are onstage in their chambers, you are allowed to pass them "green notes" -- so called because the paper is green -- through the characters known as security staff. You can request a personal word with your legislator, or request he or she vote a certain way. Or you can make an appointment; their phone numbers are listed on the Web site.

Of course, if they're wandering the halls of the Capitol, you can create your own little scenes with them, as long as they're willing to engage.

Remotely » A personal phone call can be very effective. Multiple phone calls are even more so. Savvy people who really want to influence an actor/lawmaker's behavior organize a phone tree. Here's how you do it, according to Gayle Ruzicka, whose Eagle Forum is a well-known player in Utah's Legislature. Identify five people you know who share your passion for a topic. Have them each recruit five more like-minded bit players, and so on. Try to minimize long-distance calls for your tree huggers, and make sure they know what they're talking about when they call lawmakers to influence their behavior.

Staging an intermission

You can inform/entertain the masses and our lawmakers by conducting a protest at the Capitol. While not required, the Capitol Preservation Board would like organizers to file an application, in case the board needs to provide chairs, a podium, etc. There's no limit on the number of people who can join in, although if it's an indoors thing, fire codes will dictate how many bodies can fit in a finite space. Applications are available online at utahstatecapitol.utah.gov. Click on Visitors at the top of the page, then on Capitol Hill Reservations. You might also want to read the law regulating free speech.

Theater etiquette

It's pretty simple. Be there on time, dress nicely, turn off your cell phone and speak only when it's your turn. In the galleries, you watch. In the committee meetings, you can talk if you sign up for a speaking role or are invited.

Backstage tours

Most people may have heard that the Capitol underwent an extensive renovation, completed last summer. But most people probably haven't taken advantage of the free tours that are offered. While you can wander about by yourself (brochures are provided), guided tours with docents who know all the building's secrets and stories are likely to be far more entertaining. Guided tours are conducted Monday through Friday on the hour, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (except at noon). Large groups should call ahead, 801-538-1800. Tours last from 30 to 45 minutes.